

Greenville News

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Letter: The Reedy, Greenville's 'hometown river,' is still 'far from healthy'

Greenville News

Published 12:16 p.m. ET Jul. 22, 2021

A recent letter lauded Greenville's exceptional water sources, the mountain headwaters of the North and South Saluda Rivers. For 90 years, these untrodden watersheds have provided a water supply envied nationwide. Greenville's leaders are commended for their vision in creating this system, and for recognizing the importance of "green infrastructure" in sustaining those resources.

But this is only part of the story of Greenville's complicated relationship with water. Long before acquiring those forested expanses of the Blue Ridge, Greenville had already developed a deep dependency on the Reedy River, its beloved little "hometown river." As industrialization exploded in the 1880s, Greenville looked north, for a more sustainable water source. Over the next few decades, and well into the mid-20th century the Reedy's role became one of "dispose-all," a convenient and reliable means of flushing all manner of wastes away from the city.

Nearly a century of dreadful abuse devastated Greenville's river. In the 1960s, fisheries biologists declared miles of the Reedy "devoid of life." It was infamous as the most polluted river in the state.

Thanks to stronger regulations, public pressure, and improved practices, the river has partially recovered. Yet its sediments remain infused with contaminants that are persistent and toxic, some discharged a century ago. At nearly every location tested, the Reedy remains "impaired." The reality is that it is far from clean, healthy, fishable, or suitable for contact recreation.

Greenville's remarkable growth continues, and now the Reedy downtown has been beautified into an attractive amenity for its billion-dollar "waterfront." Still, the river suffers a heavy burden of stormwater, treated wastewater, sediment, legacy contaminants, and endless trash.

The record of our stewardship must reflect both of these narratives. Indeed, the Reedy's tragic environmental history and its continuing struggles stand in stark contrast with our love affair with those pristine mountain watersheds.

We should all abide by the challenge of Wendell Berry: "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you."

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